

Some wad eat that want it

Glenan Community Woodland combines deer management with community celebration. Rhyddian Knight reflects on how a hole in the ground can become a potent resource for cultural and ecological regeneration

Under the canopy, a foot or two into the subsoil, midges bite at my midriff and sweat stings my eyes as I dig a void between two ancient boulders. Later, as I offer hammer and chisel to the bedrock, my mentor appears in his hi-vis jacket, puffing on his pipe. “If you don’t suffer for your art... then it isn’t art.”

It wasn’t commentary; it was a kind of sideways blessing. Beneath the canopy, between oak and bedrock, the ground seemed to recognise what we were up to – and was testing whether we meant it.

Deer, access and appetite

Glenan Community Woodland lies within the South Cowal Rainforest Restoration area. Our 148 hectares suffer an age-class crisis: all veterans, no youthful vigour. High deer densities suppress regeneration long before saplings can shape a future canopy.

Reducing numbers is ecologically necessary. But landscape-scale restoration cannot succeed without the communities who live within it. Venison – nutritious, local, abundant – should be central to that relationship. Yet, in practice, it circulates unevenly. Procurement barriers, limited local processing and entrenched perceptions mean that value often leaks out of rural places rather than circulating within them.

If we are serious about retaining value locally – about strengthening supply chains and building community assets – then deer cannot simply be reduced; they must be re-valued. This kind of thinking sits comfortably with the Alliance for Scotland’s Rainforest guidance, which recognises that ecological restoration and community resilience must move forward together.

The oven emerged from that logic. Low-cost, durable and locally



The community meal in full swing. All photos: Rhyddian Knight.

maintainable. It turns raw protein into shared nourishment. It reduces reliance on external catering. It creates conditions for training, micro-production and celebration. It is a piece of community capital – embedded literally and economically in place.

We wanted to feed the parish in the woods, with the woods. A community meal raised to the level of high theatre, but with the interval for food as the main act. The difficulty, as ever, was we didn’t have two pennies to rub together.

A flash in the pan

Come March, good fortune coalesced. Food Safety Outdoors Scotland were supportive of our protocols – provided we cooked in something more robust than “just the earth”. Meanwhile, Big Canopy Campout invited Glenan to become its 2025 rainforest cause. Its platform offered a chance to articulate something simple: Scotland’s rainforests are living landscapes shaped by people as well as lichens and oak.

“I have an idea you’ll like,” I told them. “Would you consider funding an oven to sink into the ground?” To my astonishment, they agreed.

At the same time, we were working with Archaeology Scotland through our ‘Adopt a Monument’ partnership. Oral history suggested Cuid Oiche at Glenan had once been the ceilidh place; an overnighting place to gather. When an oak fell across the ruins, I found myself cross-cutting beside two boulders and realised the place was asking to reveal its life and soul to a new generation.

Game on

The days before our festival were a blur of graft for the trio who formed the core team. There were multiple other events scheduled and delivered around the same time. We worked into the wee hours and got up with the sunrise – five solid days’ work.

Somewhere during that week, the hole stopped being a hole and became a centre of gravity.

Community wealth building is often discussed in terms of procurement frameworks and anchor institutions. But it also rests on physical assets – things a community can use, steward and build enterprise around. The oven is precisely that: a durable, shared means of production.

In the midst of it, Mike produced the *pièce de résistance*: a relish made from seasonal fruit to pair with the venison. “Crofters Sauce... the perfect addition to Highland game!”

We laughed – recording our own mock radio adverts between armfuls of firewood – at the way a jewel-toned relish could appear in the middle of mud, smoke and magnificent fatigue.

The big day

We arose at dawn and lit the pyre. Venison went in, sealed in trays rich with gravy, cooking low and slow above embers deep in the earth.

In the meadow, all the trimmings from polytunnels and crofts were peeled and cooked. A vegan contingent conjured wild mushroom risotto from the wood.

When we lifted back sod and moss from the oven lid, the meat emerged falling from the bone. It was time to open the meal with some words of thanks and appreciation.

Fifty-five people for lunch. Thirty-five for supper. More the next morning. Teenagers on fourth helpings.

All generations were represented, eating of their woodland in their woodland. The financial cost of quality ingredients was less than £150. We had, palpably, made magic.

Meals like this do more than create goodwill. They demonstrate possibility. They show that local protein can be prepared, shared and celebrated without dependence on distant systems. They keep value circulating where it belongs.

And yes, the Crofters Sauce really was the perfect accompaniment. I have since resolved to grow the fruit myself and produce it locally in my spare time.



Starting the fire old school.

A tradition reawakened

We lit the oven again in November. With the groundwork laid, it was simpler; deeper.

This time the focus was a community consultation with Archaeology Scotland. The names of fisher and farming families who once inhabited old Glenan village were read aloud. On Barr nam Damh (Hill of the Stag) we uncovered what we believe to be an Iron Age roundhouse platform beneath the bracken. The land felt less like backdrop and more like participant.

Our small experiment echoes research on Adaptive Collaborative Management, which finds that sustainability strengthens when local people shape decisions, learn together and retain tangible benefit from the resources around them.

In December 2025, Big Canopy Campout supporters raised £5,000 for Glenan. On its back, a further €12,000 arrived from Germany. But the deeper wealth remained here: in skills learned, confidence gained, and an oven ready for the next gathering.

www.glenanwood.org.uk

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From a hole to a whole...

In 2025, the South West Cowal peninsula received a Section 6A notice from NatureScot, galvanising collaborative deer management across the region.

At the same time, Argyll and the Isles Countryside Trust is spearheading a centralised deer larder. In community wealth building terms, that is anchor infrastructure: processing, employment, retained value.

Our oven sits humbly within that wider system. But it performs a vital function. It reminds us that deer management is not only a regulatory necessity but a way of ensuring that good, local food remains affordable and accessible to everyone in a small rural parish, with its value staying close to home.

As a small community woodland nested within the West Cowal Rainforest Restoration project, our Glenan has been described as its heart. If that is so, it is because restoration here is not abstract. It is cooked, eaten and shared.

As Atlantic Scotland faces heavier storms, saturated soils and accelerating ecological change, resilience will not be built by policy alone but by places where people gather, cook, plan and adapt together – by more holes with tended fire across the nation.

